

Qianlong Meets Macartney

Collision of Two World Views

A One Act Play

by John R. Watt

Revised by Charles A. Seifert and the Drama Workshop
of Salem High School, Salem, New Hampshire.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

English Side & Chinese Side

The Right Honorable George Lord Macartney

His Supreme Majesty, the Qianlong Emperor

Sir George Staunton

Heshen (Chief Minister)

Thomas Staunton, his son (aged 12)

Zhengrui (Imperial Legate)

Father Jacobus Li (Mr. Plum)

First Narrator/Robert

Third Narrator/Wang

Second Narrator/William

Fourth Narrator/Zhang

Historian

(see note at end on pronunciation of names)

PROLOGUE

Historian. Imagine a time when people in Europe and America knew very little about China, except that it was the place to buy tea and silk—and maybe sell a little opium. In the late eighteenth century the British were already in India and buying more and more Chinese tea.

First Narrator. We Brits needed outlets to sell our industrial manufactures. China would have been just right—except for the antiquated trade system at Canton.

Third Narrator. What antiquated trade system?

Fourth Narrator. These Western barbarians never get it right. We've had an empire going for 2,000 years.

Third Narrator. Most of the time it works fine. We provide order and stability, and a center around which things can revolve.

Fourth Narrator. We've also got the culture that makes it all worthwhile. The barbarians bring tribute, and that's right, since they need our culture to transform themselves.

Third Narrator. That's the way it goes. They bring their stuff, come here humbly, and we shape them up.

First Narrator. (Rolls his eyes) See what I mean? It's going to be hard to crack this nut. It's like the irresistible force and the immovable object. But, as you'll see, *we're* irresistible!

Third Narrator. Irresistible my foot. Turtles' eggs, if you ask me!

SCENE ONE: The Voyage Begins

Historian. It is 1792. Eager to promote trade, and dissatisfied with the Canton trading system, the British Government appoints an Embassy to negotiate with the Chinese sovereign. The Embassy seeks to open new ports for trade, arrange for a place where British merchants can live year round, and establish a permanent mission in Beijing, the Chinese Empire's Northern Capital. The Embassy is to be led by Lord Macartney.

Macartney. That's me. *(Harrumphs)* I'm the Ambassador. I speak Latin, Greek, French and Italian. If I may say so, I'm very well read. I've traveled all over Europe, then I led a mission to Russia. I've been governor general of the British West Indies and governor of Madras. I survived a duel with a major general. I'm an Irish baron but married well and expect to become an English Lord! *(Dusts off clothing)*

Second Narrator. Yes, your Lordship. We set off in late September with three ships and almost 700 men. The Ambassador was accompanied by his right-hand man, Sir George Leonard Staunton.

Staunton. (Clears throat) Ah, yes . . . I'm a doctor of medicine and doctor of law, and a literary type, don't you know. I was in Grenada when his Lordship showed up. We met,

and here I am, a sort of right-hand man, I suppose. I wrote a book about our travels, which the great Hegel studied. (*To Narrators*) Carry on.

First Narrator. Thank you, Sir George.

Second Narrator. Staunton was accompanied by his twelve-year-old son, George Thomas. Everyone calls him Tom.

First Narrator. Tom served as his Lordship's page.

Tom. It's a lot of fun going to China. I'm learning Chinese on the trip from some really cool Chinese priests who have been living in Italy and speak Latin. My father got them to come with us. My main teacher is Mr. Plum, because his name is Li, meaning Plum. That's him over there. (*Points to Mr. Li*) He doesn't speak English, so we talk in Latin. I'm learning to write those weird characters. I'm keeping a journal of the trip and putting in all the things the grown-ups don't talk about.

Mr. Plum. (Aside) He's a good boy. Very clever. Much smarter than his dad.

Second Narrator. His Lordship and Sir George spent the voyage reading up everything they could about China. When he was in Russia, Macartney met a man who had worked on border problems with the Chinese. He said the Chinese had a superiority complex. If you weren't Chinese you were a barbarian.

Macartney. Right. Bratschev was pretty uncomplimentary about those people. Said they were ignorant as hell. Quite right, too. They don't know a damn thing about England. Or science. Thought the earth was square and China in the middle of it. Ye gods!

Staunton. But it was Montesquieu who got our attention. Called China a despotic state whose principle is fear. According to him they're obsessed with ritual. Spend their time bowing and scraping. Haven't caught up with the times.

Macartney. We'll have to look into that, George.

First Narrator. And his Lordship was the man to do it.

Historian. In March 1793 the embassy arrived in Batavia, in the Dutch East Indies.

Macartney. What a hellhole!

Staunton. Full of dysentery!

Tom. And pirates!

Historian. The embassy lost a few men but pressed on, and arrived at Macao on June 20th with four ships.

Scene Two: Up the Coast to Tianjin

Historian. The British embassy is now, at long last, off the coast of China. The Imperial government already knows about it, because the East India Company had sent a letter telling them that His Majesty King George would be sending an envoy.

Third Narrator. Thanks to our efficient postal system we heard about this embassy within five days of their arrival off the south coast.

Fourth Narrator. We have to explain things, or you won't know what's really going on. These red-haired barbarians from the Great West Ocean keep wanting to send envoys. Fine. They can send who they like.

Third Narrator. But what a bother for us. Have you ever seen anything as wild as a red-haired barbarian? Their talk sounds like dogs barking!

Fourth Narrator. And they haven't any idea how to behave.

Third Narrator. And boy, do they smell weird.

Fourth Narrator. We heard from the governor of Guangdong that this red-haired king was planning to send a mission to pay tribute on the occasion of our emperor's birthday.

Third Narrator. They missed our emperor's 80th birthday by two years. Such ignorant people.

Fourth Narrator. Still, at least they understand the need to transform themselves.

Third Narrator. Their leader has this strange name. MA-GA-ER-NI. What a mouthful. Can you say it?

Fourth Narrator. Certainly. MA-GA-ER-NI (*Stresses each syllable*).

Emperor. (*Stage center, on throne, but speaking from behind narrators*) The British ruler appears to be sincere; therefore his Tribute Mission may proceed up the coast. But since their contacts have been informal and their education limited, we must be constantly informed about their progress. Our officials must be ready to deal with them wherever they land.

Heshen. The local officials have been instructed to keep us fully informed.

First Narrator. We fobbed the locals off with some lists of gifts that made their eyes pop, then set off up the coast.

Staunton. I got off at some islands to look around. Found that the farmers manure their fields with—can you believe it?—human droppings.

Second Narrator. Oh my God!

First Narrator. The stench!

Staunton. Still, they're pretty industrious. But when we saw the bound feet on the women—oh dear, oh dear. What a preposterous practice!

Macartney. Come on, George. Look what we do with our women. It's a sexual fetish, old boy.

Third Narrator. (To Fourth Narrator) Can you beat these Europeans? Look at all the grease and powder on their hair.

Fourth Narrator. And all that ridiculous tight white clothing.

Third Narrator. They look like ghosts and demons!

Fourth Narrator. Maybe that's what they are.

Macartney. The important thing is, George, they've got nothing to compare with our ships. Can we get some pilots to take us into the Yellow Sea?

Staunton. I'll see what I can do, Sir. But don't count on it. Their pilots are an ignorant, scurvy bunch. We may have to navigate on our own.

Scene Three: The Forces Converge

Historian. The English embassy has made unexpectedly swift progress. Any day now they will land off Tianjin. Their tribute gifts have to be unloaded. The Imperial Chief Minister, Heshen, has appointed officials to take care of this.

First Narrator. Now that we're about to land, His Lordship has to give the troops their marching orders.

Macartney. Gentlemen, you must conduct yourselves with peculiar caution and mildness so as to enhance the renown of the English name. If there is any misconduct, I shall consider it my duty to punish the offender—and, if need be, let Chinese justice take its course.

First Narrator. Chinese justice? Better watch out.

Third Narrator. While these ridiculous foreign devils strut around, our Imperial Court is going to great care and expense to see that they are properly treated.

Fourth Narrator. Our Sage Emperor himself is supervising the plans.

Emperor. (To Heshen) Not too much ceremony, not too little. Since the red-haired envoy is coming from afar, we must display our kindness and instruct these people appropriately to assure their sincerity. We must also find out what gifts they have sent. The envoy and his associates can be invited to a banquet or two and receive some gifts from us. Then they should be sent home.

Heshen. Your servant has appointed officials to supervise the task.

Emperor. Appoint that junior salt commissioner Zhengrui as Imperial Legate to supervise the English and instruct them in etiquette. We must ensure that they understand their place and are transformed by our virtue.

Zhengrui. What a dreadful assignment. These English dogs are unbelievably arrogant. They can't stop boasting about their wonderful gifts! But how could I refuse to obey our Sage Ruler? It took hours to unload their stuff and 35 junks to carry it. Now we've got to attend to their daily needs. And I have to teach them basic manners. Oh, dear, oh, dear!

Third Narrator. We arranged for MA-GA-ER-NI and his aides to meet with our Governor General. They were instructed to report to the Emperor at his summer retreat in Rehe (Jehol).

Fourth Narrator. MA-GA-ER-NI seemed a bit upset.

Third Narrator. Apparently he thought he would be received in Beijing. What cheek!

Fourth Narrator. Our Governor General overlooked their vulgar behavior. He sent them his visiting card, then we proceeded upriver.

First Narrator. Yes, we're sailing up past all these hordes of people standing on the banks gawking at us.

Second Narrator. We've just learned that the banners on their ships are calling this a tribute mission.

First Narrator. Our incredible gifts tribute! His Lordship was ready to blow up.

Macartney. You can imagine my consternation. Of course I kept our larger goals in sight.

Staunton. We pretended not to notice their derogatory signs.

Second Narrator. But there was worse to come.

Zhengrui. (Approaching Macartney for first time, with Chinese narrators beside him) It is our solemn duty to discuss with you the ceremony of the three kneelings and nine prostrations. *(Gets down on knees and demonstrates how to do the kowtow)*

Macartney. I cannot and will not represent His Majesty in that manner.

Staunton. It's quite out of the question.

Macartney. Quite so.

Zhengrui. This is a matter of Court etiquette and ritual integrity. This is how we all greet our Sage Emperor. We are not treating you any differently from ourselves.

Second Narrator. Their attitude is stiffening. They keep saying it is essential for us to do it.

Zhengrui. (Turning around and speaking to Chinese narrators) The English barbarians have no idea that they should dress up and respectfully kneel and bow to the Emperor's documents, his meals, every expression of his authority. They don't understand he's the Son of Heaven and Supreme Ruler over all subject peoples! It's a privilege to kneel before him!

Third Narrator. What turtles' eggs they are.

Fourth Narrator. They can't even eat with chopsticks.

Zhengrui. I am trying to teach them as best I can. I've reported to the Emperor that they are deeply ashamed of their loutish behavior and are practicing the kneelings and prostrations—well, sort of.

Fourth Narrator. The Chief Minister said they wouldn't get an audience till they did it.

Third Narrator. Up to now MA-GA-ER-NI merely takes off his hat. What a stiff!

Fourth Narrator. Maybe his knees don't bend. These far-off people have all kinds of handicaps.

Zhengrui. If he goes on like that, I'm in big trouble. What on earth am I going to do?
(Wrings his hands)

Historian. Chinese orderlies have unloaded all the English goods from ships onto caravans and escorted them to the Northern Capital, Beijing. The English are being treated with great kindness and entertained with numerous banquets.

Third Narrator. Yup. It's spectacular.

Fourth Narrator. People pressing all around, just stupefied at the sight of all these foreign devils.

Third Narrator. You should've seen them eating. What a hoot.

Fourth Narrator. We laughed till our sides split.

Both Narrators. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha.

First Narrator. Where the hell do all these Chinese people come from? You can't get away from them.

Second Narrator. No privacy. Have you ever had 100 people watch you swallow every bite?

Tom. (To Mr. Plum) Isn't it fun eating with chopsticks! Do you eat like that in Rome?

Mr. Plum. No, lad. In Rome we do as the Romans do.

Macartney. Chopsticks are an invention of the devil.

Tom. Papa. Papa. When are we going to see the Emperor?

Mr. Plum. Hush, boy. Your father's busy with his memoirs.

Staunton. (Writing in diary) Hmm . . . ah, yes. We observed the agricultural practices, and the labor required of peasant women. Notwithstanding their merit, the husbands arrogate an extraordinary dominion over them

Macartney. And the mandarins are trying to do the same with us, George. More of their foppish court ceremonial. They can't seem to get it that we have our proprieties, too. English dignity is at stake! They may rule the land, but we rule the seas. I'll have to write a letter.

Scene Four: Final Preparations

Historian. After the embassy arrived in Beijing, it was time to unpack the gifts. The English technicians began the laborious task of assembling the planetarium.

First Narrator. It took the poor devils eighteen days.

Staunton. Since their notions of astronomy are quite antiquated, we're hoping that our scientific equipment will help to get them up-to-date.

Second Narrator. Meanwhile His Lordship wrote a letter.

Macartney. I informed the officials that I would perform the kneeling ceremonies to their Emperor if a Chinese official of my seniority did the same to a picture of His Majesty. That'll cook their goose, don't you think?

Tom. It had to be translated from English to Latin to Chinese to Court Chinese. I wrote out the characters, because nobody else dared to. Mr. Plum thought it was pretty cock-eyed. Said we just didn't understand what the ceremonies were all about.

Mr. Plum. (Looking perturbed, and whispering) Be careful, lad. Things are not looking too good. Deus vobiscum, per Christum Dominum nostrum. (God be with us, through Christ our Father.)

Historian. Meanwhile, in Rehe, distrust is growing.

Emperor. (To Heshen) The English envoy is vain and pretentious. He is not to be trusted. Zhengrui has misinformed us. His ideas are a muddle. He is contemptible and ridiculous.

Heshen. (Reassuring) Your servant has informed the responsible officials that they are unworthy and odious. Should we proceed with this business?

Emperor. Yes. Let the English delegates come, then send them away, quickly.

(Brief pause)

Historian. It is ten days later. The Barbarian mission has arrived at Rehe.

Zhengrui. MA-GA-ER-NI pretended to be indisposed, so SI-TAN-TON presented their letters to our Chief Minister. More evidence of their fickle behavior.

Heshen. (To Emperor) The English object to our court ritual. It is said that their leg clothes are too tight to enable them to kneel down and bow their heads.

Emperor. (Angry) The ignorant fools! Let them kneel and bow once. Reduce their supplies, and degrade that idiot Zhengrui.

Zhengrui. (Aside) Of course. I get blamed for everything. As if I started this mess! What's a man to do with ignorant barbarians? *(Shakes his head)*

Heshen. Your servant has learned that they greet their king by kneeling on one knee and kissing his hand.

Emperor. (Startled) Kissing? How revolting. Let them kneel on one knee. But no kissing! *(Shudders)*

Heshen. Their boorish behavior must not be allowed to disrupt our ceremonies.

Emperor. Let it be recorded that they were respectful but ignorant. Send them away as soon as the birthday ceremonies are completed.

Scene Five: The Climax

Second Narrator. It's three o'clock in the morning and pitch dark. And now we must leave for the Emperor's court.

First Narrator. I've already tripped over a bunch of bloody pigs and dogs. I got my breeches torn.

Second Narrator. Now we have to wait three hours till the Emperor's cortege arrives.

Tom. Oh, look! Here he comes! Everybody's kneeling and prostrating themselves. Mr. Plum! What are you doing?

Mr. Plum. Just do as you're told, lad. Kneel and bow your head a bit.

Tom. We knelt and bowed our heads a bit.

Second Narrator. The Emperor went in to his tent. Then we approached.

Fourth Narrator. When MA-GA-ER-NI ascended the platform to the throne and saw the Son of Heaven, his legs trembled so much that he fell flat on his face.

Third Narrator. Clumsy oaf! Still, he prostrated himself.

Fourth Narrator. That's for sure. It's in our records. *(As narrators report this scenario, Macartney approaches the Emperor, kneels down and clumsily prostrates his head three times. Then he proffers a jeweled box with the king's letter inside it. An attendant steps forward and takes the box. Then Macartney returns humbly to his place, never turning his back on the Emperor.)*

Third Narrator. Naturally we made sure he didn't talk directly to our Sage Emperor or hand Him anything in person.

Fourth Narrator. That would have been a breach of protocol. It would have upset everything.

Tom. It was actually like this. Lord Macartney, my father, Mr. Plum, and I went to the edge of the platform. Lord Macartney climbed up, kneeled on one knee before the Emperor, presented His Majesty's letter in the jeweled box and some small presents, then came down. *(As Tom speaks, Macartney, Staunton, Mr. Li and Tom mimic this scenario.)*

Tom. Then my papa and I go up and make the ceremony.

Staunton. The Emperor invites the Ambassador's page up to his throne and desires him to speak Chinese. Then he takes from his girdle a purse and presents it to him. Quite an honor for the lad, don't you think? *(Tom and Emperor mimic this action.)*

First Narrator. From what I hear, more likely a little bit of you know what!

Second Narrator. Eighty-two years old, and still a randy old geezer!

Macartney. George, do you see those ambassadors from Pegu and the Kalmucks? Their appearance is not very splendid, is it?

Staunton. No, Sir. Strange company, if you ask me.

First Narrator. A banquet followed for all the high-ups. Then we were escorted back to our residence. And that was that.

Macartney. I was, to be sure, shown around the Imperial domain.

Staunton. It appears, Sir, that the Emperor already possesses many fine European artifacts.

Macartney. Yes. I fear, George, that the Emperor may not think so much of our presents after all.

Staunton. And our impressions of his Court are not too flattering, are they?

Macartney. Well, you have to admire the organization and the numbers. But I think they're distinctly frayed around the edges.

First Narrator. We encountered the Emperor one more time, at an entertainment.

Second Narrator. Technically it was twice. At the first, gifts were exchanged, the usual stuff. All pure formality.

First Narrator. Oh, yes. At the second we got up as usual at 3:00, waited for hours with all the Court, then knelt as the Emperor went by.

Second Narrator. Now it's back to Beijing. His Lordship looks pretty grim!

Scene Six. Departure

Historian. Back in Beijing Lord Macartney attempted to explain to the Chief Minister the purposes of his mission. But the response, while polite, was unenthusiastic.

Heshen. MA-GA-ER-NI has been assailing me with his useless ideas. I had to find ways to divert his chatter.

Zhengrui. Excellent, excellent. Can we tell him it's time to leave?

Heshen. Yes. Since we have presented our Imperial rescript, there is now nothing left for him to do but depart.

Emperor. I explained, as graciously as possible, that it was nice of these English subjects to bring their tribute, but we didn't actually need any of it. As for their proposals, these were simply out of order and could not be countenanced. Now we order them to return safely home.

Mr. Plum. The Emperor thanks you all for coming and wishes you bon voyage.

First Narrator. That's what he says! The fact is, the condescending old dodo has really let us have it.

Tom. The Court missionaries toned down the translation, so that his Lordship wouldn't get too angry.

Macartney. So the matter is now settled. Dammit. How frustrating. But we can't give up.

First Narrator. (Aside, with hand to mouth) Can't we? We enter Beijing like paupers. We remain like prisoners. We quit like vagrants. I say let's go home.

Macartney. On the way south I will discuss our concerns with the Imperial viceroys accompanying us. Some of them seem to take an interest. Perhaps we may achieve something after all.

Mr. Plum. (To audience) I know better. They'll just humor the old boy. I've seen it all before.

Fourth Narrator. We must escort them by land to Canton, making sure that none of them disobey our commands.

Zhengrui. The route will be lined with military, to make sure they stay in line.

Third Narrator. Then they'll set sail from Canton and that'll be that.

Fourth Narrator. Unless, of course, they return with more tribute.

Zhengrui. Heaven forbid.

Afterwords

First Narrator. The news of our embassy's churlish treatment caused some inconvenience to his Lordship on our return to England.

Second Narrator. But after their accounts were published, European people began to realize the problems of dealing with China. Praise gave way to disparagement.

First Narrator. And anger. They couldn't go on treating our embassies like that. For one thing, their navy was a joke. We could blow them sky high—and when the war came we did!

Staunton. But what was worse, they were way behind the times and didn't know it.

Second Narrator. The day would come when they would find out.

Tom. How ironic that it came because of the opium trade.

Fourth Narrator. (Musing) After they went to war with us, the British foreigners got everything that MA-GA-ER-NI asked for, and more. And for 150 years they kept it all.

Third Narrator. We had to be very patient.

Fourth Narrator. But we didn't forget. And now it's a new era.

Third Narrator. No more foreigners to boss us around.

Fourth Narrator. We've got the world's fastest growing economy,

Third Narrator. The world's biggest army,

Fourth Narrator. The world's best cuisine,

Third Narrator. The smartest businessmen.

Fourth Narrator. And Hong Kong and Macau are back in our hands.

Both Narrators. We get the last laugh! Ha-ha-ha!

THE END

Data and some verbatim lines from the study by Peyrefitte, with some adjustment to the analysis by Hevia. (For references, see study notes.)

Note on pronunciation of Chinese names: There are no foolproof rules for getting these names right, but it will help the play to get them somewhat right. "Q" in the Chinese pinyin system is pronounced like a very sibilant "ch." Thus, Qing becomes something like "tching," and Qianlong becomes something like "tchienlung." "Zh" has the same sound as English "J" (*not* French J), thus Zhengrui should be pronounced something like "Jerngruey." Heshen is easier. Pronounce "He" as in English "Per" or "Her" but without 'r' sound, and "shen" as in "Attention!" Thus, "Heshen." Tones are another matter. If you have a Chinese language teacher in your school, ask for help!